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ABSTRACT

A study investigated the use of small groups for speech evaluation in the fundamental speaking course. The use of a small group is seen as a method of reducing student fear of public criticism. Subjects were 97 male and female undergraduate students enrolled in Introduction to Speech courses at one of four different colleges in the Southern California area. The students were unaware that a study was being conducted and filled out a questionnaire they believed to be "standard procedure" for the class. Questions focused on subjects' perceived alteration of future behavior as a result of the method of evaluation that was used, along with their comfort with that method, the validity of the method, and whether or not they were threatened by that particular method. The second part of the questionnaire asked the subjects to rate which source of evaluation they would prefer--instructor, small group, or self. An ANOVA and T-test were conducted on the data in order to arrive at the conclusion. Results showed that the use of small groups was found to be an effective method of speech evaluation. (An evaluation questionnaire is attached.) (RAE)

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Abstract

This paper describes an empirical study conducted to investigate the use of small groups for speech evaluation in the fundamental speaking course. The use of a small group is seen as a method of reducing student fear of public criticism. An ANOVA and T-test were conducted on the data in order to arrive at the conclusion. The use of small groups was found to be an effective method of speech evaluation.

Towards a New Method of Classroom Speech Evaluation: The Small Group

Through the years, experts in the field of speech communication have acknowledged the need for evaluation in the speech classroom. Young (1974) argued that criticism is a vital part of teacher behavior. However, Holtzman (1960) noted that every instructor wrestles with "What can I say or write or do that will result in an improvement of a student's communicative ability?" (p. 1). As far as the areas needing evaluation, McGrew (1924) stated it succinctly when he argued for a balance of both positive and negative criticism with an emphasis on both content and delivery.

The need for evaluation of both content and delivery has met with general agreement. However, a great deal of criticism has been directed toward the methods through which such critiques, or evaluations, should be administered. The quest for the most effective method of evaluation has continued for several years. Early suggestions include Wiskell (1960), who argued for a nonpartisan classroom observer to be present in order to evaluate both student and instructor. Holtzman (1960) felt that both oral and written criticism were needed, and should be employed when based upon eleven specific

criteria that he provided. He also advocated a question and answer period during the critique. Harris (1963) further suggested that the progress of the student and the overall effect of the speech were necessary criteria for criticism.

This line of research continued with Wiseman and Barker (1966), who proposed a new method of criticism based upon peer group evaluation. They argued that training students to be critics and evaluators not only saved money (less instructors needed), and time (less work for teachers), but also provided a superior, overall evaluation of the speech.

Hance (1967) countered Wiseman and Barker's peer group concept by arguing that instructor criticism was still the best method for evaluation. He provided guidelines by which instructors might be improved as critics, thus upgrading the overall method of instructor criticism. Wolvin and Wolvin (1975) felt that both methods of evaluation were valid. They combined peer evaluation and instructor criticism as criteria in a contract grading system for the classroom.

Despite the earlier research conducted, and the various methods examined, Young (1974) stated that very little knowledge had been gained with regard to this

concept, and communication scholars still were unable to determine the best method of criticism. He argued that research studies testing the effectiveness of criticism and evaluation techniques were, for the most part, shallow and inconclusive. Young felt that the students' perceptions and opinions needed to be more closely regarded. He conducted an exploratory investigation which indicated that students perceived certain types of criticism to be significantly more helpful than other types. The results provided implications for the refinement of instructor critique behavior with an equally balanced emphasis on peer evaluation.

Staton-Spicer and Bassett (1980) examined the research conducted in the area of classroom speech criticism and presented the five most favorable methods of evaluation. The areas listed were written self-critique, audience response, peer feedback, instructor feedback, and measurement through attitude/behavior change. Although the authors felt that all of the mentioned methods were adequate and valid, they failed to single out any one method as superior to the others.

Research to date has merely reflected this weakness by providing a variety of evaluation methods while failing to indicate which method is seen as superior by

either teachers in the classroom or by the students themselves. Research has shed some light, however, on student satisfaction with qualified peer group evaluations. Since student improvement is the main goal of any pedagogical environment, the method that best facilitates achievement of this goal needs to be found.

It is suspected that a superior method of evaluation does exist, based upon past research dealing with peer groups. If peer group members comprise a small group used for evaluation, it is proposed that this method of criticism would be favored by students over either instructor criticism or self evaluation.

Thus, it is hypothesized that:

> H: Students whose speeches are evaluated by a small group of trained peers will express a greater level of satisfaction and comfort with that method of criticism, as compared to students who are evaluated by either the instructor or themselves.

If the hypothesis is confirmed, it will strengthen and support the argument for peer evaluation of speech as a function in classroom speeches. Failure to confirm the hypothesis will strengthen the argument for alternative methods of criticism.

Method

Subjects

Ninety-seven male and female undergraduate students participated in the study. All of the subjects enrolled in Introduction to Speech courses at one of four different colleges in the Southern California area during the fall semester. The subjects were unaware that a study was being conducted and were led to believe that the questionnaire was "standard procedure" for the class.

Measure

A questionnaire was administered to the subjects, asking various questions concerning the method of evaluation received. The questions focused specifically upon the subjects' perceived alteration of future behavior as a result of the method of evaluation that was used, along with their comfort with that method, the validity of the method, and whether or not they were threatened by that particular method.

A second part of the questionnaire asked the subjects to rate which source of evaluation they would prefer--instructor, small group, or self.

Subjects were able to respond to the questions by means of a five-point scale. The ratings used were "strongly agree," "agree," "don't know," "disagree," and

"strongly disagree." The responses were coded for statistical purposes with numerical values. "Strongly agree' was coded with a five, moving down to one for "strongly disagree."

All of the subjects received the same questionnaire regardless of the college attended. Minor modifications were made in the questionnaire for each college in order to adapt to the method of evaluation that was employed.

Procedure

The ninety-seven subjects were broken down into three groups based on what school they attended. Group one consisted of forty-one subjects from one school and was used for evaluation of self-criticism. Group two consisted of thirty-one subjects from one school and represented small group evaluation. Group three was a combination of two smaller classes at two different colleges and consisted of twenty-five subjects who represented instructor-only criticism.

Midway through the semester, after all of the subjects had received some form of training in speech evaluation criteria, the test was administered.

Group one subjects delivered their speeches to classmates and were videotaped. Upon completion of a speech, subjects then went into another room and viewed

the videotape. The subjects then met with the instructor and evaluated the speech for the instructor. After the meeting with the instructor, the student was immediately asked to fill out the questionnaire.

Group two subjects delivered their speeches to classmates as well, yet no videotape was employed. After three or four students had spoken with nothing said by the instructor of the class between each speech, the class was broken down into small groups of three to five students along with one speaker per group. Each small group of peers then evaluated the speech through discourse and interaction. The instructor was not present in any of the groups. When the class was dismissed, those who had spoken were detained and asked to respond to the questionnaire.

Group three subjects presented their speeches to classmates and upon completion, were evaluated either verbally or in writing by the instructor only. After evaluation, the subjects responded to the questionnaire.

Variables

The dependent variable for this study was the level of satisfaction the subjects expressed concerning each method of evaluation. All subjects were given the opportunity to rate each method.

The independent variables in the analysis were the three methods of evaluation proposed.

Statistical Analysis

A T-test was conducted to examine significance between the groups. An analysis of variance was employed to examine anysignificant difference in the results due to the various groups. The significance level was set at the p.05 level.

Results

Tentative support for the hypothesis was obtained. The T-test analysis showed a statistically significant difference for small group evaluation preference over self evaluation ($T=-4.82$, $df=96$, $p<.001$). The small group $\bar{X}$ was 3.38, and the self $\bar{X}$ was a distant 2.52. The analysis further showed that small group evaluation had a statistically significant difference in preference over teacher evaluation ($T=2.67$, $df=96$, $p<.009$). The small group $\bar{X}$ was 3.38 while the teacher $\bar{X}$ trailed at 2.95. Teacher evaluation, with a $\bar{X}$ of 2.95, was favored over self evaluation, whose $\bar{X}$ was 2.52 ($T=2.67$, $df=96$, $p<.009$).

Since satisfaction is related to behavior, perceived behavioral differences were investigated as well. An analysis of variance was computed and showed a

significant difference between the groups in the four behavior areas tested. Small group evaluations showed a significant difference in perceived alteration of behavior ($F=4.31$, $df=2$, $p<.016$). Based upon a grand mean of 3.84, self evaluation was least behavior altering ($\bar{X}=3.54$), teacher evaluation second ($\bar{X}=4.04$) and small group evaluation surfaced as the most behavior altering ($\bar{X}=4.06$).

Small group evaluations also produced the most comfort with the method of criticism ($F=9.57$, $df=2$, $p<.001$). With a grand mean of 4.15, teacher evaluation was the least comfortable method ($\bar{X}=3.84$) with self evaluation in the middle ($\bar{X}=3.95$). Small groups appeared to be the most comfortable method ($\bar{X}=4.68$) of evaluation.

In the third behavior area tested, that of validity of evaluation, statistical significance was established in favor of teacher evaluation ($F=17.21$, $df=2$, $p<.001$). The grand mean for the groups was 4.09 and teacher evaluation ($\bar{X}=4.48$) surfaced as the most valid. Small groups ($\bar{X}=4.39$) was second and the least valid method was self evaluation ($\bar{X}=3.63$).

The final area of behavior tested for was the extent individuals were threatened by the method of evaluation. Again, statistical significance was established ($F=3.25$,

df=2, p<.043) and again it favored small groups. The grand mean was 1.87 and small groups ($\bar{X}$=1.58) were considered the least threatening. Self evaluation ($\bar{X}$=1.95) was second, while teacher evaluation ($\bar{X}$=2.08) was the most threatening method.

A multiple classification analysis was computed in order to examine the percentage of variance accounted for. The results indicated that 17 percent of the variance in the subjects' comfort could be accounted for by knowing which group the subject came from. Twenty-seven percent of the variance could be accounted for with the validity of evaluation, whereas 8 percent was found for the alteration of behavior and 6 percent for the level subjects were threatened by the evaluation.

Discussion--Future Areas for Research

The results of the study provided a great deal of support for the hypothesis. Not only did the subjects prefer small group evaluations for their speeches, but high levels of satisfaction were displayed in three of the four behavior areas tested.

Although a number of factors may account for the test results, the findings are significant enough to warrant future research in this area. Some areas of weakness in the study revolve around the groups tested.

A social desirability bias may weigh heavily in the questionnaire completion. With teachers administering the tests, subjects may contaminate the study by trying to tell the teacher what they think the teacher wants to hear. Various teaching methods also need to be examined more closely. Four different instructors were used and therefore, four different teaching styles and classroom atmospheres affected the results. Perhaps a re-test with one instructor evaluating three groups for the three methods would be in order.

Despite whatever experiment contaminations may be involved, results do indicate, very strongly, that students prefer and benefit from small group peer speech evaluations. These findings not only support the arguments of Wiseman and Barker, but open new avenues of research. Investigation into the best methodological approach of incorporating this process into introductory speech courses, as well as proper training techniques for the small groups, appears to be the next step in classroom speech evaluation research.

Application/Implications

The use of the small group findings in this study has been employed in the classroom by this author in two ways. The first approach was effective, but recently

abandoned for the later.

The first method of application was along the lines of the method employed in the study. Students in the fundamentals course were broken down into small groups of five to six. (Assuming an average class is approximately 24 students, the result would be four groups of six.) On a given speech day, one to two students from each group were assigned to speak. After speaking, the instructor would make minimal comments. After all the speakers had spoken for the day, the class was placed into their groups. The speakers' peers would then evaluate their speeches.

This method of evaluation assisted in reducing communication apprehension and most students commented positively about it on student course evaluations. However, in light of the fact that large audience numbers continue to intimidate students and that instructor critiques are generally more helpful and qualified, the following second method of application is presently employed by this author.

Each class is divided into an even number of groups. (Usually 24 students are put into four groups of six.) The students are gathered into these groups for in-class activities and exercises prior to the first graded speech

assignment. This allows the students to get to know each other and to become comfortable with the members of their group.

For the first graded speech, each group is assigned to a specific day (or days, depending upon the size of the groups and days available for speech giving). Only that particular group is required to come to class on that particular day. Therefore, the students are presenting their first graded speech to only a small group whom they know and whom they find less intimidating. Small group discussion is fostered in each group and both peer and teacher critiques take place.

For the second graded speech, groups one and two are required to attend a specific number of assigned days. Thus, the speech is given to a group twice the size of the first, yet it is still not the entire class.

By the third or fourth graded speech, all groups attend every day, with only certain speakers speaking on assigned days. The student finally speaks to a full audience. All subsequent speeches are delivered to a full house.

This method of small group evaluation requires some advance planning and a clear explanation to the students. However, the benefits are substantial. In the past three

years, every student course evaluation given has assessed this method and it is praised without fail. The students feel less pressure and less intimidation with the small groups, thus reducing their communication apprehension. Most students comment that by the time they present their first speech to the full class, they feel no where near the apprehension they claim they would have felt if their first speech had been before the large group. This author has seen an increase in the quality of student speeches and a reduction in communication apprehension by the use of this method.

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Questionnaire

*Mark the space which most accurately reflects your opinion in regards to today's speech and the criticism of that speech.

SA= Strongly Agree A= Agree DK= Don't Know

D= Disagree SD= Strongly Disagree

1. I will alter my subsequest speaking performances based upon the evaluation of this performance.

_____SA _____A _____DK _____D _____SD

2. I was comfortable with the method of evaluation.

_____SA _____A _____DK _____D _____SD

3. I considered the source of the evaluation to be valid.

_____SA _____A _____DK _____D _____SD

4. I felt threatened by the evaluation received.

_____SA _____A _____DK _____D _____SD

5. I would prefer to evaluate my own performance in class.

_____SA _____A _____DK _____D _____SD

6. I would prefer to be evaluated by a small group of my peers.

_____SA _____A _____DK _____D _____SD

7. I would prefer to be evaluated by the instructor only.

_____SA _____A _____DK _____D _____SD